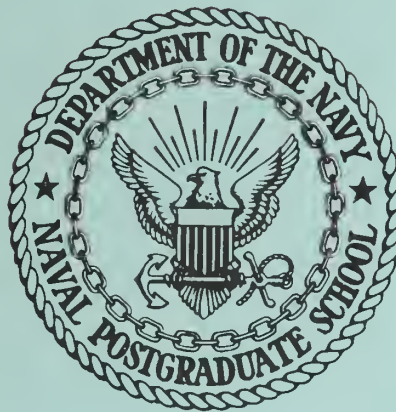


# Working Paper Series

QUALITATIVE INTERVENTION ASSESSMENT:  
A CONCEPTUAL HEURISTIC FOR OD CHOICE

by

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THE HUMAN RESOURCE MANAGEMENT RESEARCH PROGRAM  
DEPARTMENT OF ADMINISTRATIVE SCIENCES

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Qualitative Intervention Assessment: A Conceptual Heuristic For  
OD Choice

ABSTRACT

A conceptual framework for assessing and choosing among alternative OD interventions is presented. The method is based upon recognition that the welfare of individuals, work groups, and the total organization are not always positively correlated. A number of examples illustrates the various trade-offs and interactions among these independent welfare considerations. A specific heuristic method for choosing among alternative interventions is presented. Finally several propositions stimulated by this approach are suggested.



## A Conceptual Heuristic for OD Choice

An essential requirement for rational choice is some understanding, albeit incomplete, of the likely consequences associated with the alternatives available. In the context of organization development, it is important to anticipate the possible effects of any intervention upon the client system. Because most organizations are rather complex and the number of direct and indirect change effects is virtually infinite, it is not practicable to predict with certainty all of the potential or even only the important consequences. Still it is necessary to develop some expectations of the positive and negative reactions of the client system to any intervention if the consultant is to choose intelligently. In order to sort out the more significant results from the myriad possibilities, it would be useful to establish a conceptual framework that would organize the consultant's and client's expectations over time.

There are at least three levels of analysis in theories of organizational development: individuals, groups, and the total organization (Beer, 1976; White and Mitchell, 1976). Each level reflects different perspectives on various system dynamics and may highlight dimensions and variables that are not obvious from the other analytic points of view. For example the concept of goals takes on very different meanings depending upon whether the referent is the individual member the primary work group, or the formal organization. Indeed the issue of goal congruence across these various levels

represents one of the most common challenges in modern organizations. Yet this has not always been recognized. Several traditional schools of management thought have presumed that goal attainment at one given level would naturally be followed by goal attainment at another. In particular, scientific management assumed that increased organizational welfare through higher productivity would directly improve individual welfare through greater wages. Similarly human relations assumed that stronger social cohesion within work groups would generate more collaboration and superior problem solving. Finally management science assumes that more sophisticated and effective decision making would enhance the welfare of the entire organization and concomitantly the welfare of everyone in it. However desirable these correlations may be in principle, it remains an empirical question as to how strong they may be in reality. (Nord and Durand, 1976).

In other words it may not be reasonable to assume that the welfare of the individual, the welfare of the group, and the organization's welfare are all positively related in all situations. What may be much more useful is to consider these three welfare functions as independent dimensions of managerial action. Thus some OD interventions would ideally increase welfare at all three levels, while other interventions may have positive effects at one level and negative effects at others. As a way of visualizing this concept, imagine the domain of OD interventions as an action space characterized by the three orthogonal dimensions of individual welfare, group welfare,



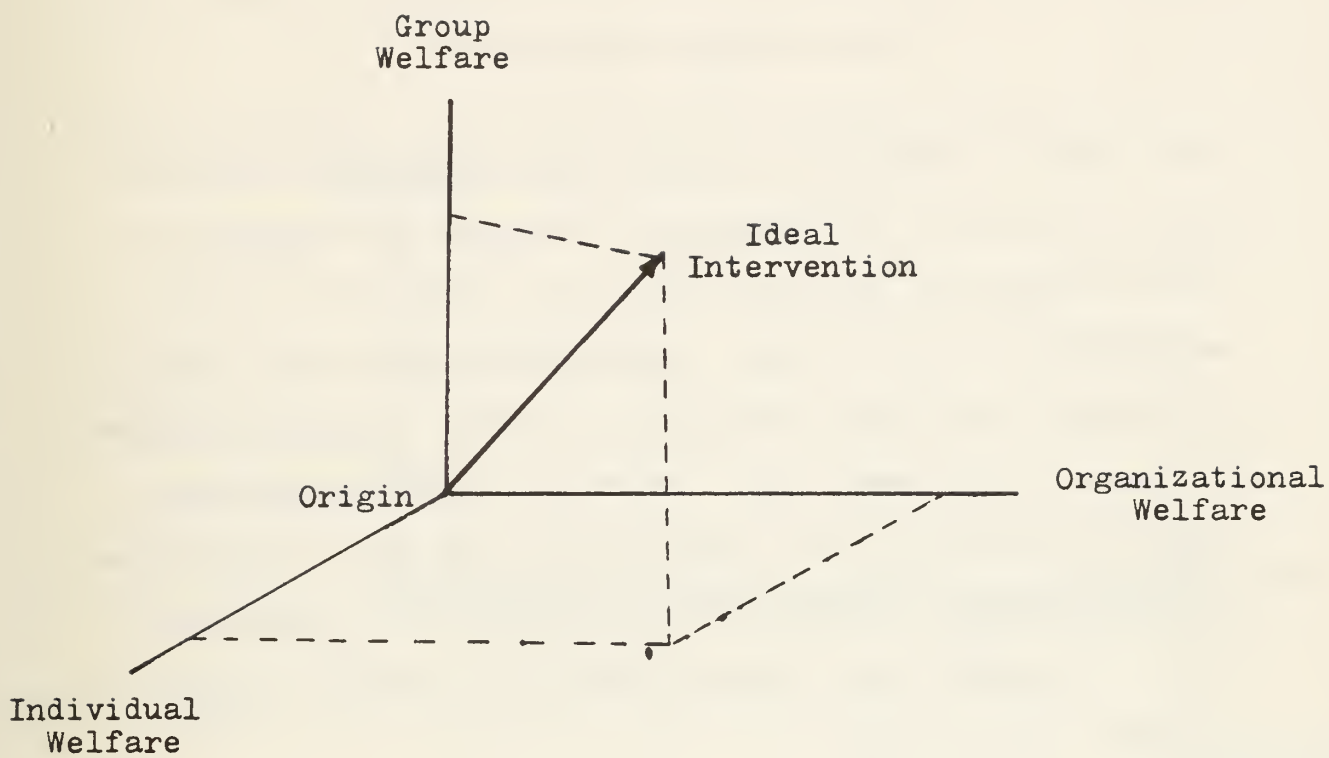


Figure 1. Organization Development Action Space

and organization welfare. Any given intervention would be represented by a trajectory through the welfare states experienced during the change attempt.

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Place Figure 1 about here

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The ideal OD intervention would maximize welfare along all three dimensions simultaneously and would be depicted as a vector emanating from the origin in a positive direction equidistant from all axes. Unfortunately the real world is not always benign and the ideal is seldom if ever achieved, at least in the short run. There are frequent instances when the welfare of the organizations can only be increased at the temporary expense of the welfare of the individual or of the group (e.g., industry during recession and the military during war).

Typical OD interventions usually entail some initial costs along at least one of the welfare dimensions before the long term benefits can be realized. For example laboratory training for managers may involve a large degree of anxiety and stress for individual participants while eventually resulting in a more cohesive and supportive work group. It remains to be seen whether the organization itself receives any tangible benefits from such an exercise (Campbell and Dunnette, 1968). This particular intervention could be illustrated in our conceptual framework as in Figure 2.

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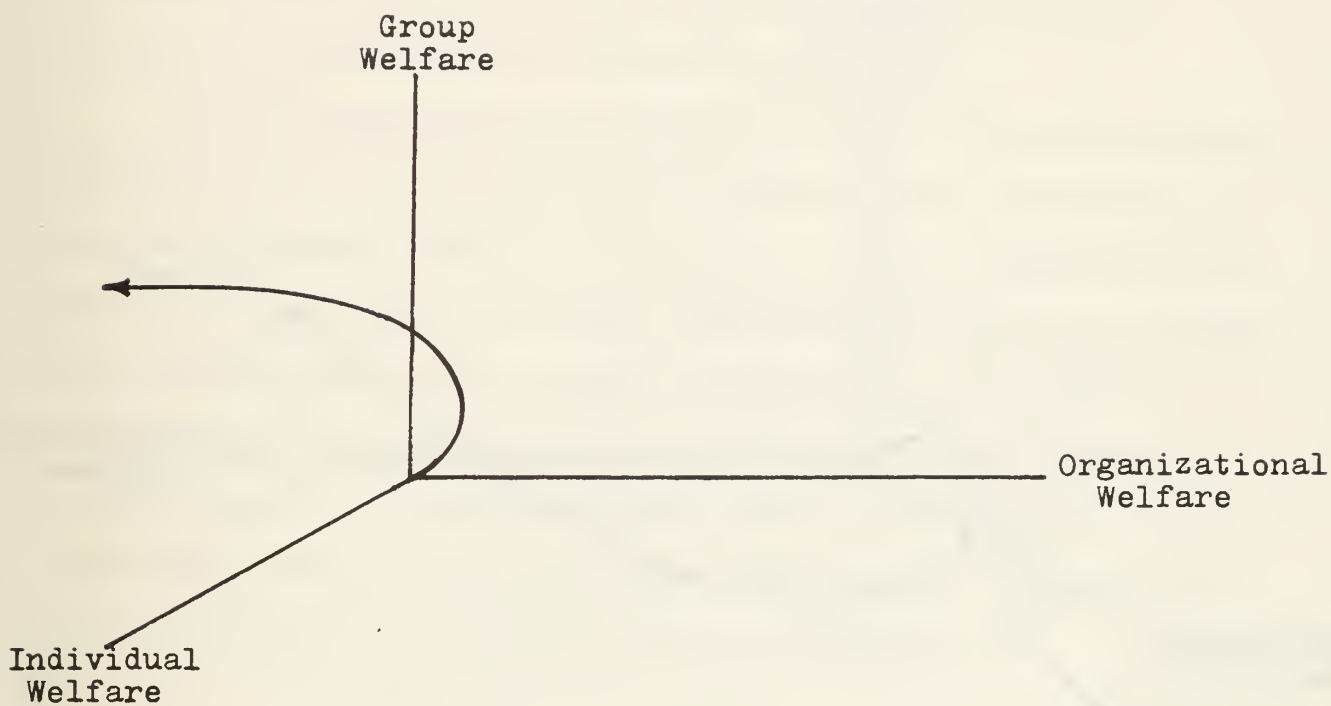


Figure 2. Laboratory Training Intervention

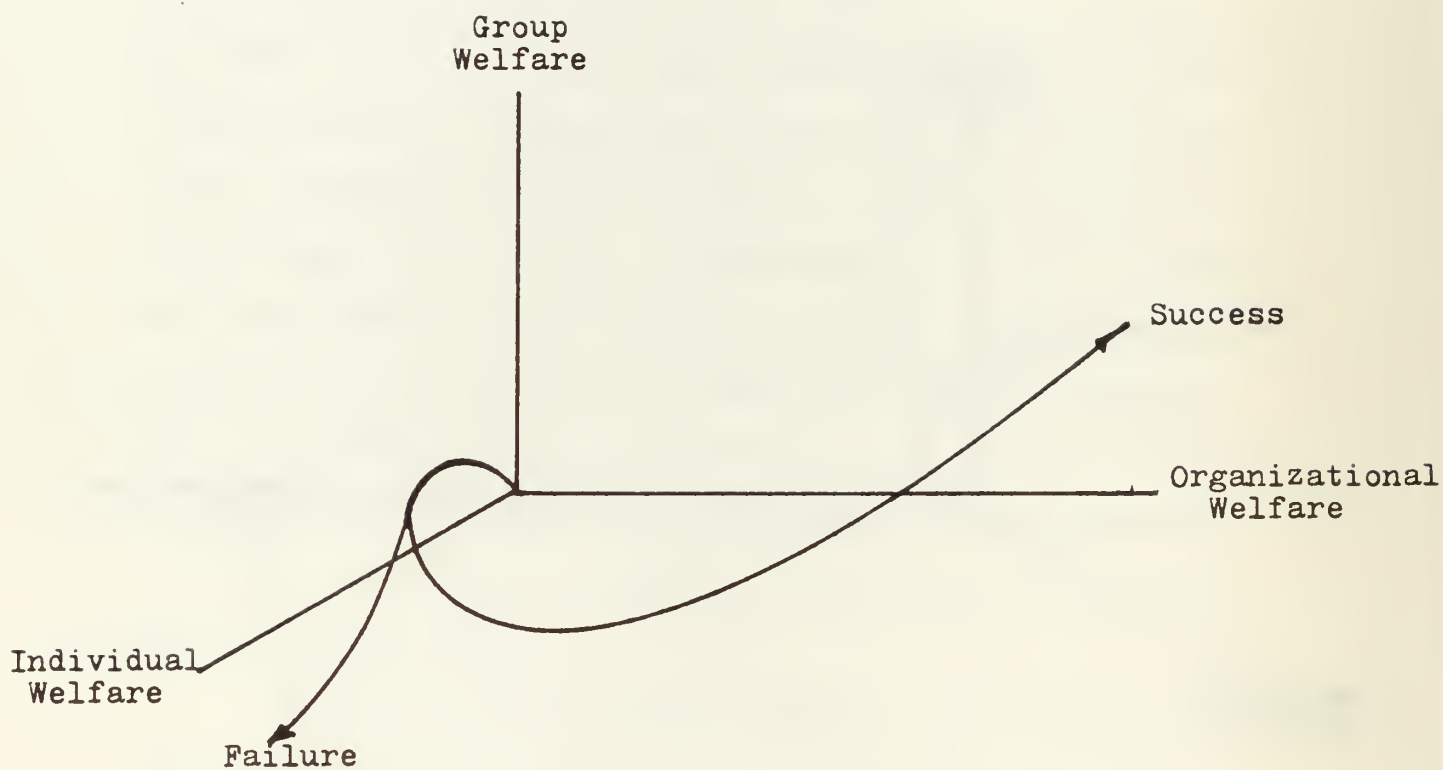


Figure 3. Confrontation Meeting

There is initially a loss in individual equanimity and confidence as the T-group breaks down interpersonal defenses and shares critical feedback. As the group begins to build trust, openness, and mutual support, the welfare functions at both the individual and group level start to grow positively. Yet the experience may be neutral as far as the company is concerned, and may even be detrimental if underwritten by company resources with no demonstrable return.

The interaction between group welfare and organizational welfare can be illustrated by the method of the confrontation meeting (Beckhard, 1967). At first as conflicts and disagreements are identified and aired, group cohesiveness may decrease and defensiveness may increase, but as the issues become resolved and constructive decisions made, both the group's welfare and the organization's are expected to improve in the successful confrontation meetings. Failures in confrontation may not be able to turn the corner. (See Figure 3)

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Place Figure 3 about here

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The interaction between individual welfare and organizational welfare can be illustrated by two simple examples. In the first instance the company may ask for a personal sacrifice from the individual employee such as more challenging objectives in return for some compensation such as a promotion. Obviously neither would agree to such an exchange unless both stood to gain in the long run. In the second instance the employee may ask for a personal consideration from

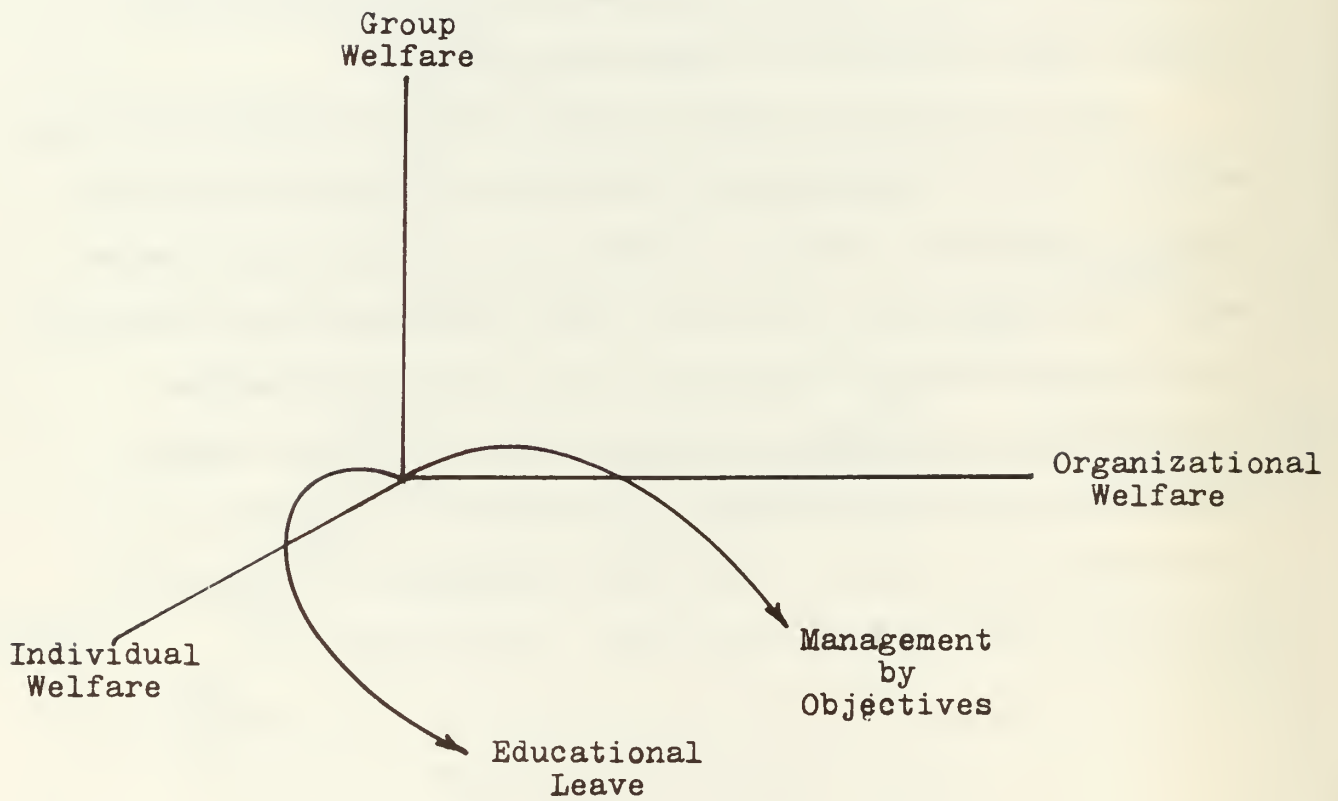


Figure 4. Individual-Organization Interactions

the company such as an education leave with the expectation that the company would gain a more loyal and effective person in the end. (See Figure 4)

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Place Figure 4 about here

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Finally there may be multiple interactions among all three welfare dimensions that exhibit complex dynamics over time. In fact OD interventions generally should not be expected to follow a linear or even monotonic course of progress. Organizational life is rarely so simple or fortunate that everyone's welfare is maximized simultaneously and efficiently, as would be characterized by a positive straight line from the origin. Organization development typically follows more circuitous paths in the search for higher levels of satisfaction at all levels. (See Figure 5)

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The reason that the most direct and efficient paths are not always available is that there often constraints and barriers that limit freedom of action. The nature of the constraints may be economic, legal, cultural, technological, psychological, physical, etc. For example the welfare of individuals may be bounded at lower levels by minimum wage laws, union contracts, OSHA requirements, employment legislation and prevailing social norms. At the upper end, individual welfare may be constrained by the economic resources of the organization, other psychological



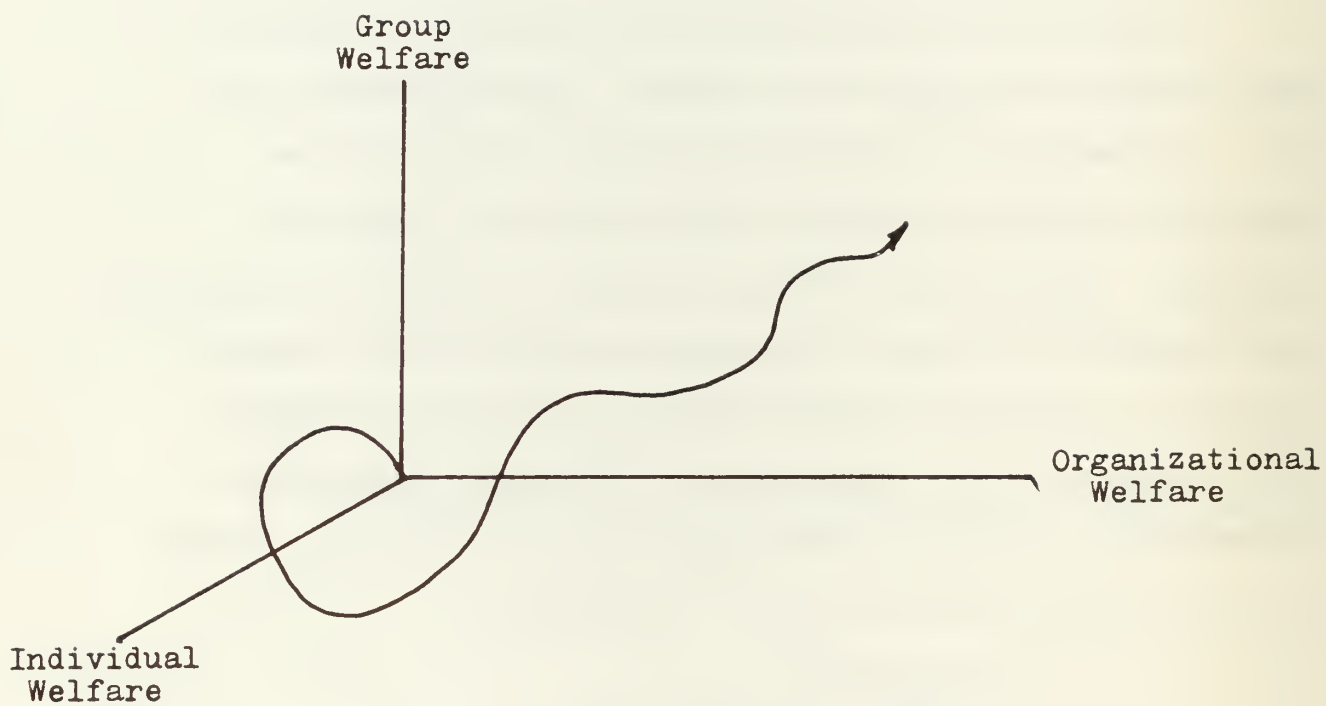


Figure 5. Dynamic Organizational Development



commitments external to the organization, and the personal ability and ambition of the individual to succeed. Similarly the welfare of the work group may have upper and lower bounds determined by the physical environment, the technology of work, and customs and mores of the local culture. Organizational welfare may be constrained by economic competition, governmental regulation, and the quality of management. In short constraints may arise from factors in the external environment or they may arise from internal characteristics of the organization. Although the latter tend to be more amenable to OD interventions than the former, the central point is that neither consultants nor managers can act with total freedom in promoting individual, group, or organizational welfare. There are limits that circumscribe the feasibility of OD action. They may not be as clear and simple as illustrated in Figure 6 but there are real constraints nevertheless.

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The extent to which OD practice explicitly recognizes and accommodates the limits of the feasible solution space pertaining to any given client system will largely determine the absolute and relative success of the OD intervention. In absolute terms the probability of failure will be reduced by ruling out infeasible alternatives. In relative terms the expectation of the likely outcomes on the part of both the client and the consultant will be moderated to be consistent with organizational realities, and thus reduce the likelihood of gross disappointment.

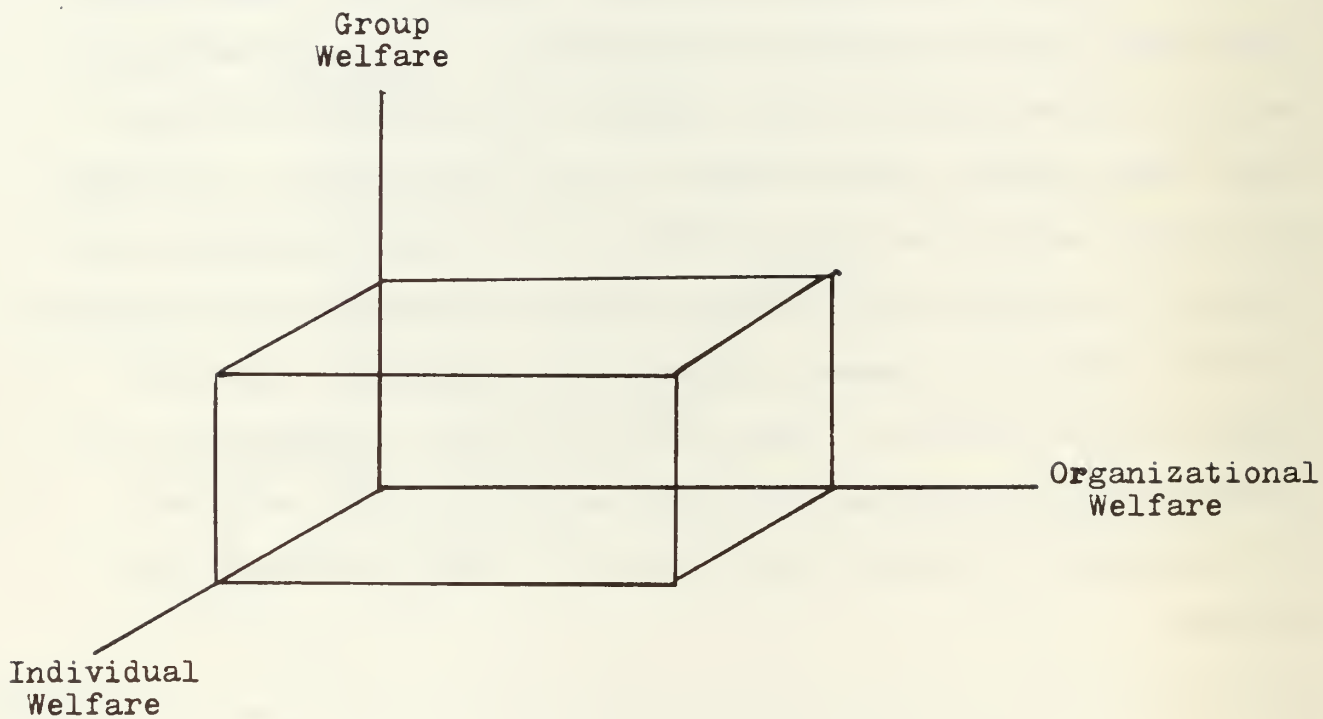


Figure 6. Systemic OD Constraints

One of the greatest advantages of an external OD consultant is the objective ability to test and disconfirm the subjective perceptions of imaginary constraints on the part of the client. However in this strength may also lie the risk of assuming anything is possible thereby encouraging clients to engage in futile change attempts. It is one of the major challenges of OD to balance the ambitious aspirations to maximize individual, group, and organizational welfare with the practical limitations of organizational life.

Up to this point the proposed framework has been very conceptual and not very heuristic. The welfare of individuals, groups, and organizations has only been discussed in very abstract terms. Moreover the interactions among these dimensions while analytically graphic are not yet operationally useful. What is required is a translation of these ideas into a mechanism which will enhance the choice process in selecting among various OD approaches. To do so it is necessary to define more specifically the meaning of individual, group, and organizational welfare.

It has long been recognized that determinants of human welfare are complex and numerous at any level. As examples, Maslow's classic hierarchy of needs and the economists' multi-attribute utility functions both recognize that improvement in the human condition cannot be characterized by any single variable model. The problem becomes even more complicated when the level of analysis moves beyond the individual person to groups, organizations, and society at large. However, it is neither possible nor necessary in the present context to develop general and

comprehensive welfare functions for our three levels of analysis. What is more appropriate is to provide an outline of potential welfare factors which may suggest salient aspects of OD consequences. The ultimate choice of which factors obtain in any given situation depends upon the assessments by the consultant and client together of the relative importance of each factor. Because every organization is unique it is not possible to specify a priori which welfare considerations will be dominant in all circumstances. However an essential component of organizational diagnosis should be the deliberate assessment of which aspects will be important at various points in time for a particular client system. The following outline of welfare consideration is not exhaustive but is illustrative of the range of issues that merit the attention of the OD consultant.

#### I. Individual Welfare Considerations

A. Stress, anxiety, comfort levels. Some OD methods such as T-groups, confrontation meetings, conflict management, etc., may generate high levels of stress that are not always tolerable or functional for the individuals involved.

B. Job Security. Interventions which involve the risk of termination, demotion, or transfers are bound to be seen as threatening by members of the client organization.

C. Career opportunities. Change programs that increase the chances of upward mobility are usually regarded favorably but may be threatening to those not seeking more responsibility.

D. Job satisfaction. The major thrust of job enrichment, job redesign, and socio-technical approaches is to increase individual satisfaction with the performance of work.

E. Personal growth. Sometimes the result of gestalt methods, transactional analysis, laboratory training, and leadership development can be substantial growth along interpersonal, emotional, and psychological dimensions.

F. Financial compensation. Change attempts that may involve significant shifts in income (e.g., the Scanlon Plan) will inevitably arouse intense scrutiny by all parties affected.

G. Time and energy demands. As more demands are made for individual time and energy, as in management by objectives and team building interventions, the less is available for other pursuits.

H. Interpersonal relations. The intent of many kinds of human relations training is to strengthen the working relations between people. However some methods, e.g., encounter groups and confrontation meetings, also run the risk of weakening relations with social interactions worse off than before.

I. Learning. Most OD techniques intend to facilitate the acquisition and development of new ways of behaving, thinking, feeling and knowing. Ideally this learning results in people who are more effective and productive in a wider variety of situations.

J. Status and prestige. For many, personal image is extremely important and therefore they may be very cautious about programs, e.g., T-groups, that may jeopardize their self-concept or others' perception of them.

K. Power. Everyone is likely to resist circumstances in which their power may be eroded. Consequently power



equalization tactics (e.g., participative management) are not universally welcome.

L. Motivation. A variety of methods (job enrichment, MBO, Scanlon plan, etc.) are designed to increase motivation explicitly. But there are others such as confrontation meetings and process consultation that may have adverse effects on motivation through the intense frustration and hostility that may be aroused.

## II. Group Welfare Considerations.

A. Social cohesion, mutual support. Interventions such as team building, family laboratory training, and participative management, contribute to the development of more supportive relations within work groups. It is presumed that the more cooperative the members are the more effective the group as a unit will be.

B. Trust. There should be a foundation of shared attitudes and feelings of interdependence if intragroup collaboration is to be an enduring group characteristic. Many OD techniques have direct or indirect consequences on the level of group trust.

C. Openness. The ultimate indicator of trust is the amount of open behavior exhibited by the group. It is believed that healthy groups are able to raise publically feelings, issues, and conflicts more frequently and constructively than ineffective groups. However there may be some question about how much openness is functional over the long run.

D. Stability of norms. The degree to which common expectations are known and predictable reduces uncertainty in the social interactions within the group. While the absence of

shared expectations may weaken group functions, the other extreme of rigid norms may also be dysfunctional in terms of flexibility and change.

E. Communication. A very common challenge to OD consultants is to improve communications. The free flow of accurate and timely information along formal and informal channels is another index of healthy groups.

F. Collaboration, cooperation. If groups are high on these five previous criteria, then the probability is high that numerous instances of mutual help and support will be reflected in the actual performance of tasks.

G. Decision making. An important function of many groups is making decisions. Healthy groups are characterized not only by superior decision but also by flexible processes that match the varying situational and temporal requirements of different decisions (Vroom and Yetton, 1973).

H. Flexibility of roles. As groups are able to modify and interchange their task and maintenance roles over time, the more effective they are likely to be across a variety of situations and as members of the group change.

I. Adaptability. Change and occasional crisis are inevitable group experiences. Successful groups adapt to both the revolutionary and evolutionary demands that may be placed upon them.

J. Resolution of conflict. Another key function of groups is the management of conflict. Inferior groups ignore, suppress, gloss over or otherwise fail to resolve task and interpersonal conflicts. Superior groups are able to confront conflict directly and seek constructive approaches to resolution.

K. Group status. A frequently important consideration is the prestige and image of the group in the eyes of its members. When this status is low it may be difficult to effect improvements along the other dimensions of group health.

L. Power. The ability to command influence or resources in the larger organization can often be a crucial determinant of the group's long term survival. In classic bureaucracies, the formal power may be substantial.

### III. Organizational Welfare Considerations

A. Performance. The ultimate criterion for success (commonly referred to as the 'bottom line') may differ from organization to organization. For commercial firms, it may be profit, for hospitals it may be number of patients treated, for schools it may be students enrolled and so forth. However for some organizations objective success criteria may be unclear or undefined, such as for government agencies and public sector organizations (e.g., churches). Although the measurement of organizational effectiveness may often be very problematic (Campbell, 1975), the welfare of any organization is intimately tied to its formal task performance however it is determined. For many client systems the concern for productivity, efficiency, quantity and quality of production, etc. are paramount management concerns.

B. Growth. A pervasive welfare concern typical of most organizations is the expansion of resources, membership, markets, product lines, assets, etc. Indeed for many industrial concerns the most important measure of organizational health is the rate



of growth over time. However recently there have been numerous challenges to the imperatives for growth especially in government and multi-national corporations, (e.g., Schumacher, 1973).

C. Costs. In the absence of hard output measures, measures of economic input begin to assume even greater importance in determining organizational welfare. Costs and growth in costs are expected to remain within certain standards if organizations are to be regarded as economically sound.

D. Control. As purposive systems organizations have a fundamental need for control over the behavior of their members. While this control need not be, indeed cannot be absolute, the degree to which management can direct internal and external activities in conformance with established objectives largely affects organizational success.

E. Innovation and creativity. Because environments are dynamic and often turbulent, organizations rarely can afford the luxury of maintaining the status quo. They will become stagnant or obsolete unless they are able to renew themselves with fresh ideas, opportunities, and capabilities.

F. Adaptation. What is important at the group level becomes essential at the level of the organization. There must be an openness to the environment so that the organizations can develop a robustness to succeed across a wide variety of circumstances and opportunities.

G. Structural flexibility. Occasionally effective adaptation requires modification of internal structure, e.g., hierarchical and horizontal relations. Rigid, inflexible organizations with great inertia are at a competitive disadvantage with respect to those that are morphogenic in response to external demands.

H. Climate. The social and psychological ambience of an organization contributes strongly to the motivation and commitment that members are willing to exhibit in the pursuit of collective goals.

I. Personnel stability. Although certain amounts of employee turnover may be advantageous in terms of renewing membership, low personnel retention may entail severe penalties in performance and cost especially in scarce labor markets.

J. Managerial competence. The collective abilities of managers to perform all the operational and strategic functions required in modern organizations is a corner stone upon which future success depends. Without a wide distribution of competence, an organization is extremely vulnerable to the sudden loss of key individuals.

K. Organizational loyalty. As an intangible and sometimes rare commodity, loyalty can nevertheless be extremely significant in periods of crisis as well as over long periods of adversity. The dedication and faithfulness of employees are invaluable assets which may pay incalculable dividends.

L. Integrity. American industry in the past decade has witnessed an unfortunately large number of instances in which organizations failed to exhibit the ethical and moral character expected by society at large. Without deep and abiding commitment to human and social values, organizations may easily drift without meaning or purpose towards states of illegitimacy and decay.

In presenting this list of three dozen welfare considerations, we do not pretend that these variables are definitive or that

the list is complete. These are only examples which serve to illustrate the range of concerns generally relevant to organizational change. Practitioners should add other considerations that may be especially pertinent to the specific organization of interest. In addition to lengthening each of the dimensions of individual, group, and organizational welfare functions, it is possible to add dimensions such as for society at large or even higher levels of analysis. However for reasons of practicality if not simplicity it is prudent to limit the conceptual framework to three dimensions at a time.

Now that the concept of welfare functions has been illustrated it remains to suggest a method for using this concept to aid the OD choice process. First this framework can be used as a point of departure for a comprehensive diagnosis of any particular client system. The consultant may begin by developing a list of welfare considerations that are of the greatest importance to the specific client. Then as impressions and data are collected, diagnosis along the three dimensions of welfare may be conducted to determine the client's state of health in specific terms. It is important to identify the strengths as well as the weaknesses in any organization, as a narrow focus on pathology will be misleading and may generate inappropriate remedies. In short the welfare concept may be used to develop a checklist to assess organizational health at a given point in time.

In addition to describing the status quo, the framework could also be used to develop a longitudinal prognosis of the

client's health in the absence of any outside intervention. In organizations as in medicine, many pathologies are self-limiting, i.e., they disappear without treatment, and therefore it is not always necessary nor advisable to act in situations of distress. However the choice between action and postponement is made more intelligently when there is some reasonably sound expectation of how the client's health and welfare will develop over time. The accuracy of the prognosis is a function not only of the consultant's competence but also of the experienced intuition of the client who is most familiar with the organization and its history.

The third and most extensive use of this framework is to estimate the short and long term consequences of alternative OD interventions. As discussed earlier rational choices in OD require some judgement of what the effects will be of any feasible course of action. While these judgements may be subjective, or uncertain, biased and hence imperfect, they are the essential basis for rational action. Of course the more objective data and reliable theory can inform these judgements the more accurate they are likely to be. Although OD like management is more art than science, nevertheless these judgements can be improved by recognizing explicitly the temporal nature of organizational change and the inherent trade-offs associated with available alternatives.

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Figure 7 shows a method for the qualitative assessment of the impact of alternative OD interventions. It incorporates in a

Intervention method: Laboratory training

Welfare Considerations	Predicted Impact of Intervention			
	Immediate (one week)	Short term (one month)	Intermediate (one year)	Long term (after one year)
I. Individual				
A. Stress	-	0	+	?
B. Job Security	-	?	+	+
C. Job Satisfaction	0	0	0	0
D. Personal Growth	+	+	?	?
II. Group				
A. Social Cohesion	+	+	0	?
B. Trust	+	+	0	?
C. Openness	+	?	0	?
D. Stability of norms	+	+	+	?
III. Organization				
A. Performance	0	?	?	?
B. Growth	0	?	?	?
C. Costs	-	?	?	?
D. Control	x	x	x	x

Key to table entries: + Positive impact  
 0 Neutral impact  
 - Negative impact  
 ? Impact unknown  
 x Constrained variable

Figure 7. Qualitative Intervention Assessment



two dimensional display the major features of the concepts presented. The method highlights the qualitative impact of a given intervention on any number of welfare variables over time. The table in Figure 7 illustrates the expected consequences of laboratory training on a hypothetical organization. The OD consultant in conjunction with the principal client predicts the most likely effects of the proposed intervention on the organization over four different time periods. The table entries are coded as to whether the predicted outcomes are positive, neutral, negative or unknown. Another possibility is that a variable may be constrained and not susceptible to attempts at improvement.

The value of this assessment is that it permits the comparison of alternative OD techniques in terms of the anticipated consequences for a specific client system. Once this has been accomplished for the major interventions under consideration, a final choice can be made with a clearer understanding of the benefits and costs of each of the alternatives. After the choice has been decided and implemented, follow-up assessments can be repeated to determine the actual progress relative to initial expectations.

The basic method can be modified in several ways. First the list of welfare considerations can be tailored to match the most important concerns of the client. Second if individuals within groups or groups within organizations are not homogeneous enough to permit meaningful generalizations then it is possible to specify welfare functions for each principal individual or group. Third the time horizons can be lengthened or shortened to accommodate the rates of change for different organizations.

Fourth the assessment entries in the table may be more detailed than the simple notation allows. Short written descriptions could replace the symbols. In addition it is possible to attempt quantitative assessments if there are reliable and accurate measures of change. For example there may be quantitative indices available for performance (e.g., profit), social cohesion (e.g., sociometric tests), and satisfaction (e.g., surveys). While it is probably prudent not to make the method more elaborate than the competence of the consultant allows, the method can become more sophisticated as the practitioner and client gain more experience and insight regarding the dynamics of the organization of interest.

In summary the method of qualitative intervention assessment consists of the following steps:

1. Determination by the client and consultant together of the most important welfare considerations for the given organization.
2. Evaluation of the current strengths and weaknesses of the welfare variables previously identified.
3. Prognosis of the likely development of the client's health in the absence of any deliberate change program.
4. Assessment of relevant OD alternatives in terms of the likely consequences on the client's health
5. Selection of the strategy that maximizes health over the long run.
6. Implementation of the chosen strategy.
7. Measurement of the client's progress along established criteria.

## Conclusion

In the best of all possible worlds, OD consultants should be able to maximize the welfare of any organizations and all groups and individuals in them. But the real world is not utopian and OD practitioners can ill afford to be unrealistic. There will be inevitable trade-offs among the welfare functions of organizations, groups, and individuals (Nord and Durand, 1978) which need to be recognized by practitioners and researchers alike if OD is to succeed to any kind of managerial or scientific maturity.

The foregoing conceptual framework is a partial attempt to formulate a more comprehensive and potentially more rigorous perspective on the design and management of organizational change. In several ways it tries to make the practice of organization development more systematic than is now the case. First the identification of the appropriate system is highlighted by calling attention to the interactive dynamics of individual, group, and organization welfare functions. Second the problem of specifying relevant systems variables is treated explicitly by operationalizing the significant components of welfare functions. Third the tendency to focus interventions narrowly is moderated by the recognition of multiple consequences at numerous levels of organizations. Fourth the need for measurement and evaluation is accommodated through follow up assessments along specified criteria.

A final desideratum for a meaningful conceptual framework is that it be intellectually interesting. If it can generate accurate hypotheses, provocative propositions, and challenging questions it may provide the motivation for others to test, modify, and elaborate the concepts in the continuing evolution of



organization development as an applied behavioral science. As a measure of this last quality, the following propositions are offered as untested conjectures stimulated by this analytic perspective.

A1. A straight line isn't always the shortest distance between two points.

A2. You can't always get there from here.

B1. In organizations you rarely do just one thing.

B2. Important activities almost always have multiple consequences.

C1. You don't have to do everything simultaneously.

C2. You might be able to do many things sequentially.

D. Since not all problems are equally important, it is not crucial to optimize all solutions.

E1. It's more important where you wind up than how you got there.

E2. There's more than one road to Rome, but many lead to hell.

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